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HOW HIGH-SCHOOL SENIORS REGARD ENGLISH

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During the last week in April, 1922, the boys and girls of the fourth-year classes in the Richmond Hill High School, New York City, were asked, without signing their names, to indicate under four different headings the relative values they assigned to the various subjects taken by them during their four years in high school. The directions read:

Student's name not to appear

Check B✓ or G

Without undue regard for any single term's work, and excluding the personalities of the various subject teachers, list in the order of their relative importance, the five subjects studied in your high school course that you regard as of greatest value under each of these headings:

| Of greatest practical or commercial value | Of greatest social value | Of greatest interest | Of greatest value in the formation of character |
|---|--------------------------|----------------------|---|
| 1. Mathematics | English | Mathematics | English |
| 2. Physics | Mathematics | Physics | Mathematics |
| 3. Mechanical | Spanish | Mechanical | Physics |
| Drawing | Physics | Drawing | Spanish |
| 4. English | Mechanical | English | Mechanical |
| 5. Spanish | Drawing | Spanish | Drawing |

Indicate by a (✓) opposite *one* of the following, your habit during past four years of apportioning time in the preparation of home work:

Most time devoted {
to difficult subjects
to interesting subjects✓
to commercial subjects

Although most of the students listed, in order of their preference, five different subjects, only the first two were used in tabulating the results (it was felt that these two were most significant as being the most sharply defined in the students' consciousness); and furthermore, no distinction was made between the first and second choice—i.e., in tabulating, both were counted as if they had stood

first. It will be noted that the boys' and girls' answers were kept separate, and showed interesting differences.

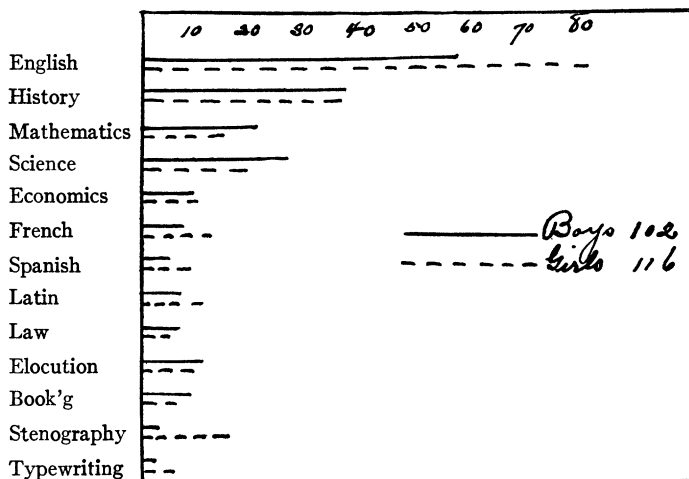


FIG. 1.—Composite Diagram of Students' ratings of values of various subjects (Totals divided by 4)

Although English teachers may have reason to rejoice over the showing, a number of questions will on second thought undoubtedly suggest themselves. For example:

1. Would the students have reacted differently, had some other than the English department collected the information?

2. Are the preferences of adolescent students of great value? Do they represent independent views, rather than those of their friends and associates, including teachers and parents. (Bertrand Russell in the May, 1922, *Century* says, "Among most people, at most times, the commonest way of judging is simply by inherited prejudices.")

In answer to the first of these questions, it may be said that every precaution was taken to elicit an honest expression of opinion. Indeed, there is evidence that the boys, at any rate, were not all averse to indicating a pronounced preference under "interest" for subjects other than English.

The second question many of us will answer affirmatively, if we are willing to admit the wisdom that underlies the growing recognition of the value of the young person's viewpoint. In this

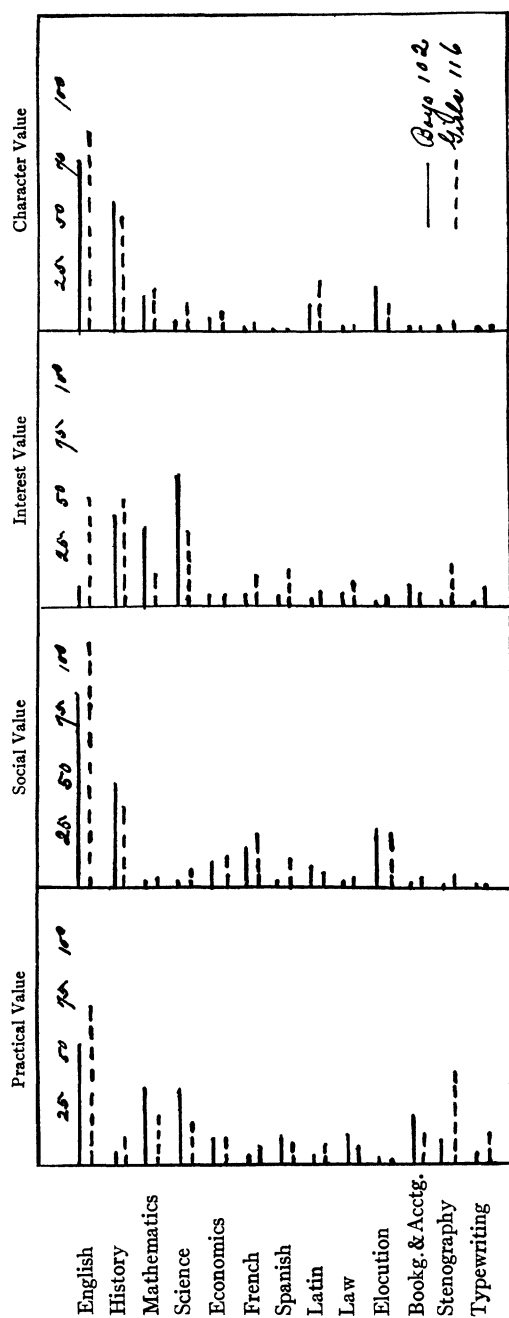


FIG. 2.—Subjects rated first or second in value by fourth-year students of the Richmond Hill High School, Richmond Hill, Long Island, New York. (Only the first four subjects and elocution had been taken by all the students.)

connection such ideas as those expressed by Dr. William McAndrew in *The World's Work* for November, 1921, are worth recalling. Under the title "The Belated Revolution in Our Public Schools" Dr. McAndrew writes, "The revolution of 1776, somewhat delayed, is reaching our schools," and proceeds to give convincing reasons for the introduction into the classroom of live questions of present-day interest to growing boys and girls, rather than the retention in the curriculum of subject matter merely traditional. In short, it seems probable that, without going to the extremes once currently reported regarding the democratization of schools in Soviet Russia, we shall in the future give increasing attention to the legitimate interests and desires of boys and girls.

If, then, we grant that the preferences expressed by the Richmond Hill pupils are genuine, and of value, what conclusions follow? Here are a few:

1. In general, girls prefer history and languages to science and mathematics.
2. In general, boys prefer history and science and mathematics to the languages.
3. Both girls and boys recognize the value of English *above all other subjects in the curriculum*; but the interest in English is almost five times as great among the girls as among the boys.

Fortunately, the remedy for this lack of interest on the part of the boys is suggested by the graph itself. The obvious thing for the English teacher of boys to do is to encourage projects in science, history, and even in mathematics, as material for written and oral English.

All of this may seem trite to the experienced teacher. The writer contends merely that the investigation furnishes tangible proof of what many of us have believed or felt to be true. At any rate, we English teachers may feel gratified because of the hearty recognition accorded English. Possibly upon this and upon other similar investigations may be based convincing arguments and appeals to boards of education for smaller English classes and for fewer class assignments to the individual teacher, to the end that a subject so vitally important as English may be more effectively taught.